

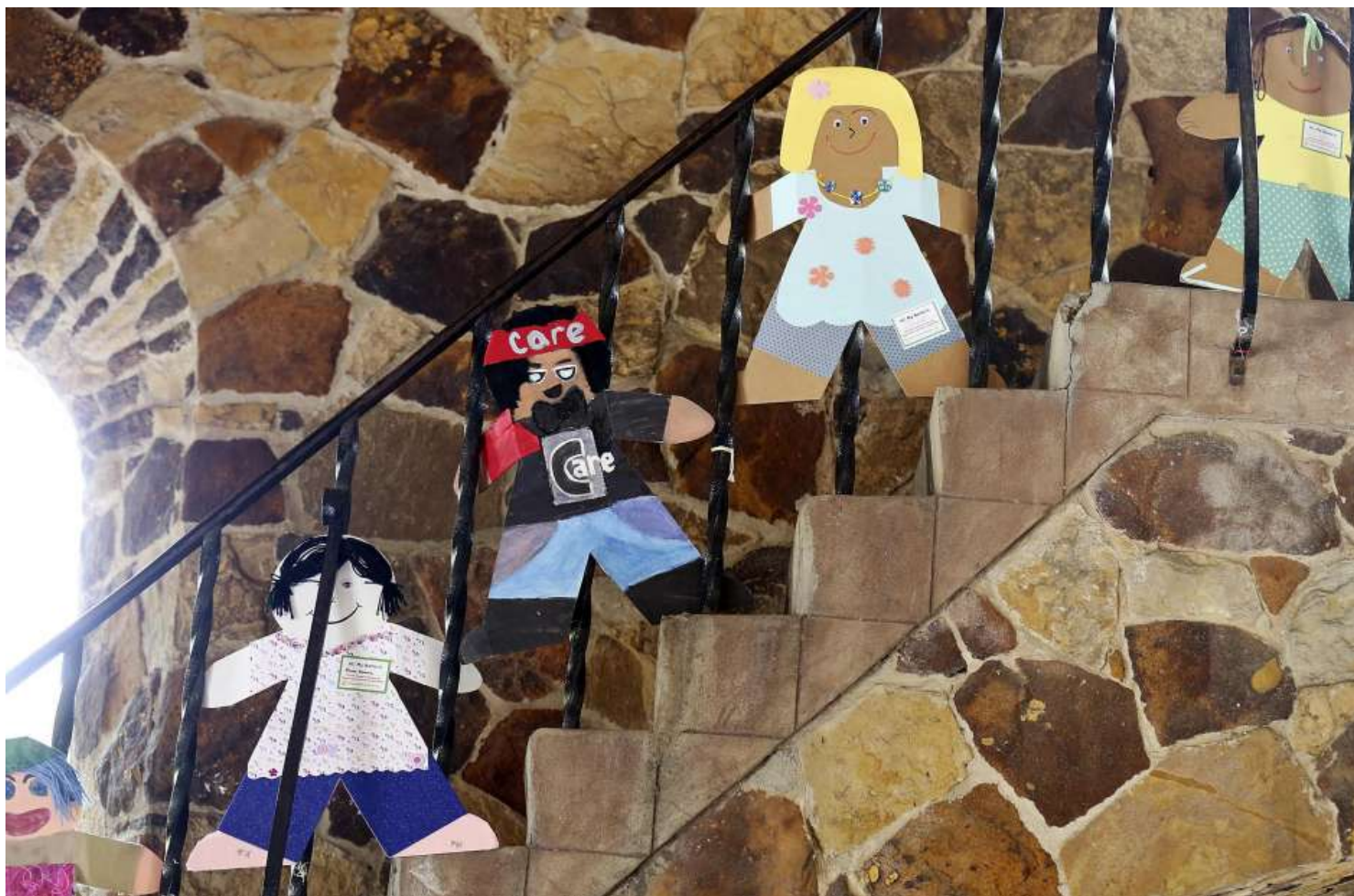
OPINION // CARY CLACK

Clack: Amid pandemic, watch for the spread of child

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Cary Clack

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These Cardboard Kids from ChildSafe represent the abused children in our community. In a pandemic, abuse will continue. It may even be more likely.

Photo: Edward A. Ornelas /San Antonio Express-News

COVID-19 can empty a grocery store's shelves, close restaurants and lock down a city, but it can't prevent child abuse.

It can force the temporary closure of the leading organization in Bexar County fighting that abuse, but it won't stop it from responding to a child's outcry.

On Thursday morning, ChildSafe CEO Kim Abernethy emailed board members to notify them of three separate instances of staff possibly being exposed to COVID-19. Testing on

janitorial staff to do any cleaning.

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ChildSafe is the only children's advocacy center in Bexar County providing specialized services to children and teens who have been physically abused, sexually abused or neglected. San Antonio has the highest proportionate rate of confirmed child abuse cases among Texas' major metropolitan cities.

ChildSafe's mission is to "restore dignity, hope and trust to children traumatized by abuse and neglect." Last year, it served 6,800 families. Of that number, two-thirds were children and the rest were their family members.

ChildSafe is the organization responsible for the Cardboard Kids you begin seeing in April, which is Child Abuse Prevention Month. The 2-foot-tall cardboard cutouts, in the shapes of children, represent the abused and neglected children in our community.

In August, the organization moved from its sterile, hard-to-reach location off U.S. 90 to a 36-acre site on the East Side at Interstate 10 and East Houston Street. The \$26.5 million Harvey E. Najim Children & Family Center near Salado Creek is a warm and inviting place, with rooftop gardens, courtyards, green spaces, art and a heritage wall display of San Antonio and the East Side history.

Children taken to ChildSafe are there because of horrific things they've experienced or seen. But the setting and ambiance are so inviting and conducive to putting children at ease that recently an 11-year asked if he could have his birthday party there.

Besides ChildSafe's staff, the building houses staff from the police and sheriff's departments, and the Texas Department of Family Protective Services, all working together, with the district attorney's office, to serve the children and their families.

Staff from those entities will be mobile or working out of their main offices during the building's closure.

“Unfortunately,” she says, “child abuse does not stop when there are disruptions in everyday life.”

In fact, during times of great stress, financial hardship and interruptions in child care and school, the rate and severity of abuse and neglect will rise.

Priority 1 cases are those in which the child is in imminent danger because the alleged perpetrator lives with or has easy access to the child or to a child who may have witnessed a homicide. Until the building reopens, ChildSafe’s forensic interview staff will do interviews in the San Antonio Police Department’s children’s interview home from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. and will be on call for emergency interviews.

Amid COVID-19, when we’re haunted by an illness whose reach and virulence aren’t fully known, we also continue to be haunted by the scourge of child abuse, whose capacity to inflict suffering, psychological damage and death we know too well.

But in this time of the virus, as in all times, Abernethy reminds us that it takes a community to stop child abuse and neglect.

“If neighbors see something and aren’t sure about it,” she says, “they should report it and let the professionals decide if it’s real.”

She urges anyone suspecting abuse or neglect to call the Texas Abuse Hotline at 1-800-252-5400.

A ChildSafe public service announcement once ended with two young girls staring into the camera and asking, “If you thought someone was being abused, you’d stop it, right?”

You would. Not even a deadly virus would separate you from your responsibility to that child.

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